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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of social experiences received in a group-care setting on the development of moral reasoning in young children. Thirty-five children approximately 4 years old, participated in the study. Twenty of the subjects attended day care or nursery school; the remaining 15 did not attend any group-care programs. Each child individually heard 12 "moral judgment" stories--6 with positive intention and negative consequences, and 6 with negative intention and positive consequence. Accompanied by a two-frame cartoon-like drawing depicting the story action, each story was read twice to each child. After the second presentation, the child was asked to rate the story character on an 8-point rating scale as to goodness or badness. Analysis revealed that only in stories involving personal property was there a significant tendency for consequence-based judgments. The major differences as a function of story content and social experience occurred in negative intention/positive consequence stories. In these stories, the group-care children rated contexts in which an actor was involved in injury to another person on the basis of intention, whereas the home-based group focused on the consequence. In stories with negative intention in which damage to personal property occurred, however, group-care children tended to be more consequence-based than did home-reared children. (Author/MP)

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Influence of Structured Group Experience

on Moral Judgments of Preschoolers

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This research is based on the masters thesis of the second author completed under the direction of the first author when both authors were in The School of Home Economics, University of Oklahoma. A version of this paper was presented at the meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development in Toronto, August, 1981. Inquiries and requests for reprints should be directed to the second author who is now in the Department of Management, Housing, and Family Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, 24061.

Running Head: Group Experience and Moral Judgment

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Abstract

Twelve moral judgment stories were read to two groups of children (mean age = 57.6 months): a home-based group ($n = 15$) and a group involved in either day care or nursery school ($n = 20$). Analysis revealed that these young children did not use consequence-based judgments in every context $p < .001$. Only in stories involving personal property was there a significant tendency for consequence-based judgments, $p < .01$. The major differences as a function of story content and social experience occur in negative intention/positive consequence stories, $p < .01$. In these stories, the group care children rate an actor involved in injury to another person contexts on the basis of intention whereas the home-based group focused on the consequence, $p < .01$. On damage to personal property stories with negative intention, however, group-care children tended to be more consequence-based than home-reared children, $p < .07$.

Influence of Structured Group Experience
on Moral Judgments of Preschoolers

Piaget (1932) proposed that children under the age of 7 years make judgments about the actions of others on the basis of the consequences of the act, whereas older children base moral judgments on the actor's intentions. Numerous investigations support Piaget's general consequence to intention pattern of moral development. At the same time, some studies support the idea that younger children may be able to discriminate between an accidental act and one that is intentional (Armsby, 1971; Buchanan & Thompson, 1973; Chandler, Greenspan & Barenboim, 1973; Costanzo, Coie, Grumet & Farnill, 1973; Darley, Klossen, & Zanna, 1978; Elkind & Dabek, 1977).

Piaget (1932) suggests that movement from consequence-based to intention-based judgments comes about partly through a loss of egocentrism resulting from peer interaction. According to Piaget both the quantity and quality of social participation are related to the child's moral development. Moral understanding is assumed to derive partly from the amount of social interaction in which the child participates and partly from the child's centrality in the peer group. During early childhood the child's behavior reflects an objective moral orientation. Adoption of a subjective moral orientation requires some opportunity to view moral rules as changeable products of group consensus. Social give and take is required for this purpose. Such opportunity is not common in the child's experience with parents and teachers because social systems such as the family and the school are structured in authoritarian

terms. The peer group is seldom organized along authoritarian dimensions and appears to possess the inherent characteristics for furthering moral development.

Thus interaction with peers may be one variable that could alter saliency of intention for the young child. Jones and Thibaut (1958) suggest that the goals of participants in social interaction influence the kinds of information attended to and the ways in which that information is incorporated into interpersonal evaluation. Changes in the focus of attention for the participant might arise from maturational factors or from the experience with others. It is plausible that in the traditional moral judgment context young children, by virtue of the socialization processes involved in peer interaction, are able to recognize intention in some contexts but not others due to the outcome surrounding environment.

Little data exist to support or refute the thesis that agemate contact is associated with advanced moral development in young children. Research confirms that during the third and fourth years of life there is a decrease in the frequency with which the child seeks proximity with the mother (Maccoby & Feldman, 1972) and a change in the objects toward whom social overtures are made, which leads to an increase in the frequency of contact with peers (Heathers, 1955). In recent review on the effects of day care Belsky and Steinberg (1978: 940) state that "it appears to be the case that children who have had a day care or preschool experience interact more with peers than do their home-reared counterparts." Moore (1975) notes that adolescent

boys who were enrolled in day care before the age of five years report higher concerns with social activities than do boys who were home reared. When observed, the day care children are rated higher in sociability with peers and are more chosen by their peers as likeable.

Devereux (1970), however, has suggested that peer-group experience may be a major hazard for children's ability to sustain what most adults would consider proper standards of behavior (at least with reference to such matters as lying, stealing, cheating, trespassing, obeying adult authority, etc.). Also Schwarz, Strickland, and Krolick (1974) in a study of 3- and 4-year-olds found that day care children exceeded their home-reared counterparts in both physical and verbal aggression toward peers or adults. Moore (1975) found that children who had experienced substitute care before age five were significantly more self-assertive, less conforming, and less impressed by punishment than a home-care group. Thus, at least in terms of these behaviors, group care may not necessarily be advantageous to moral development.

Research suggests that children in group care are involved in more peer interaction than those children which remain in the home and that interaction with peers may be a critical variable in the study of moral judgments. Perhaps it is this interaction that promotes intention- rather than consequence-based moral judgments. However, other research on peer interactions indicates that peer contact does not necessarily lead to more socially appropriate behaviors. The influence of social experience

received in a group care setting on the development of moral reasoning is thus still an open question, which this study purports to answer.

Method

Subjects. The 35 subjects used in the study consisted of children approximately four-years-old and included 10 children (5 boys and 5 girls) who attended a University laboratory, 10 (7 boys and 3 girls) who were enrolled in a community day care program, and 15 (11 boys and 4 girls) who were not attending any group-care programs. All group-care children had been enrolled in a center for at least six months prior to data collection. Home-based children were acquired through waiting lists of the two centers as well as various community programs (e.g., Public Library Story Telling Program). All children lived in the same predominantly white middle-class community.

Samples were matched as evenly as possible on age and Peabody Picture Vocabulary IQ scores. The resulting means for the final samples for home-based children on age was 57.0 months and on IQ was 116.5. The means for the group-care children were 57.4 months and 116.5 for age and IQ respectively.

Instruments

Story format. The moral judgment stories used in this study were adaptations of the traditional Piagetian stories. This format has been used by several other researchers (e.g., Costanzo, et al., 1973). There were a total of 12 stories, six with positive intention and negative consequence and six with negative intention and positive consequence. The content of the 12 stories included 4 stories in each of 3 categories: damage to a person,

damage to personal property and damage to the property of others. Within each specific category two stories were used in an effort to control for individual story effects.

Stories. An example of a story in the category of positive intention and negative consequence with damage to person is listed below. Other stories were of similar length and format.

Jill and Nancy were playing together. Jill was helping Nancy on the swing by giving her a push. But one time Jill pushed too hard and Nancy fell off the swing and skinned her knee.

Pictures. To aid the child in remembering the content of the story, each story was accompanied by a black and white two-frame line drawing. Each set contained two 14-cm x 21-cm drawings depicting the story action. An example of the drawings for the story example is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Response scale. Children were asked to rate the story character as to goodness or badness on an 8-point rating scale. To help the children with the ratings, a large bar graph was used to provide a visual depiction of degrees of goodness and badness. A rating of "1" indicated very bad and "8" indicated very good. Both sides of the graph consisted of four vertical rectangles which were 1.5-cm, 4-cm, 8.5 cm, and 13.5 cm in height and 3-cm in width.

Procedure

Each child participated individually in an interview that lasted approximately 25 minutes. One female examiner collected all of the data. Children attending programs were interviewed in a conference room at the child care facility. The home-based children were interviewed in the child's home. In these cases the examiner allowed approximately 15 minutes to establish rapport with the child prior to the interview. Parents were not present during the interview.

The child heard the 12 stories in one of six random orders. Each story was read twice to each child and accompanied by the two-frame cartoon-like drawing depicting the action. After the second presentation the child responded to the question, "What do you think of the child in the story?" If the child responded the actor was "good" (or "bad") the child was then asked the reasons for the judgment. If the child needed to hear the story again, the story was repeated. The child was then asked to indicate on the scale how good (or bad) the character in the story was. In this procedure the examiner presented to the child only that half of the bar-graph appropriate to the child's response to the initial question. Thus, a child who had initially evaluated the actor in the story as "good," now had to choose one of four levels of goodness.

Design

The final design of the study was a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ repeated measures factorial. The day care and nursery school children were combined to yield a single

condition since the critical variable under consideration was structured social experience rather than specific programming. Thus attendance or nonattendance at a group-care program served as the between-group variable. Intention valence (negative intention/positive consequence and positive intention/negative consequence) and story content (injury to person, damage to personal property and damage to property of others) served as the within-subject variables. Each subject heard 12 stories but the ratings of the two stories within a specific category were combined and this score was used as the dependent variable.

Results

Analyses focused on two major issues: 1) the consistency of children's judgments across intention valence and story context, (2) the influence of structured group experience on these judgments. Analysis of variance with repeated measures revealed that these young children did not use consequence-based judgments in every story type and that judgments were a function of structured group experience. The analysis revealed main effects for intention valence, $F(1, 33) = 4.78, p < .05$, and story content, $F(2, 66) = 8.19, p < .001$ and intention valence $\times$ story content, $F(2, 66) = 8.93, p < .001$, story content $\times$ group experience, $F(2, 66) = 2.91, p < .06$, and intention valence $\times$ story content $\times$ group experience, $F(2, 66) = 3.62, p < .05$, interactions.

Story content and intention valence effects. These preschool children did not use consequence-based judgments for every story type. Overall, characters in negative consequence stories were rated more negatively than actors

in positive consequence stories ($\bar{X} = 2.64$ and $\bar{X} = 3.24$ respectively) and actors in stories of damage to personal property were rated more positively than actors in either damage to property of others or damage to another person stories ($\bar{X}s = 3.52, 2.73$ and 2.58 respectively). These main effects, however, must be qualified by the significant intention valance x story content interaction. Individual comparisons via Tukey tests showed that only in stories involving personal property was there a significant indication of consequence-based judgments, $q(6,66) = 5.71, p < .01$, with actors in stories of positive consequences receiving a more positive rating than actors in negative consequence stories (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Effects of structured group experience. The group experience variable significantly interacted with intention valence and story content indicating that children's judgments in specific contexts are influenced by group experience. The major differences as a function of story content and group experience occur in stories of negative intention and positive consequence (see Table 1).

In stories of negative intention and positive consequence the group-care children rated characters in damage to personal property stories more positively than actors in stories involving property to others, $q(3, 66) = 6.08, p < .01$, whereas the home-based group rated actors in both personal property stories, $q(3, 66) = 4.00, p < .05$, and damage to a person stories, $q(3, 66) = 4.37, p < .01$, more positively than damage to the property of others. Furthermore,

the children in group care rated actors in personal property damage stories with negative intention and positive consequence more positively than injury to a person stories, $q(3, 66) = 6.20, p < .01$.

Direct comparisons in the ratings of home-based and group-care children showed that in injury to person stories with negative intention and positive consequence, group-care children made more use of intention (rated the actor more negatively) than did home-based children, $q(2, 66) = 2.93, p < .05$. In the damage to personal property context with negative intention and positive consequence, however, home-based children showed a tendency to rate the story character more on intention than did group-care children $q(2, 66) = 2.63, p < .07$. Additional support for this latter finding is found in a chi-square analysis which showed that the home-based children gave significantly more extreme negative ratings to the story actor than did the group-care children, $\chi^2(1) = 3.86, p < .05$.

Thus, in stories with negative intention and positive consequence group-care children showed significantly more intention-based judgments than the home-based children on injury to person stories and also a trend for more consequence-based judgments in the personal property stories.

Discussion

The data show that young children can respond to intentions within moral judgment stories although this is a function of story content and group-care experiences. Individual comparisons showed that only in stories involving personal property was there a strong trend for consequence-based judgments.

The findings fail to provide total support those of Elkind and Dabek (1977) who found that intentionality was more likely in stories involving personal injury. It is only among the group-care children and only when personal injury is compared to personal property damage that Elkind and Dabek's findings are replicated. Perhaps another way to interpret the data is to argue that young children are centering on the most salient story characteristic which in some contexts will be the intention and in others the consequence.

Costanzo, et al. (1973) as well as Feldman, Klosson, Parsons, Rholes, and Ruble (1976) found the 5-year-olds make motive based-judgments under conditions of positive outcome but not under conditions of negative outcome. This suggests that when motive and outcome information conflict, positive motives do not offset negative outcomes as strongly as negative motives offset positive outcome. In our study negative motive appears to be more influential than positive motive in offsetting the influences of consequence. This is evidenced by the finding that intentionality is found only in stories of negative intention and positive consequence and not in stories with positive intent and negative consequence.

Some support is found for Piaget's conception that social interaction influences the processes of moral development. The children involved in group-care were significantly more intention-based when the story actor intended injury to another person but slightly more consequence-based if the positive outcome involved personal property. Due to the social milieu of the day care center or nursery school perhaps it should not be surprising

that intended personal injury or consequence to personal property become highly salient features of the environment. The saliency of these characteristics, then, increases their influences in the judgments of the child. The issue of personal property may be lessened within the context of the home, and within that same context intended personal injury may be experienced less often. The specific variables affecting the saliency of the intent and/or consequence in a particular story type, however, are still not adequately delineated. It may be that the teachers, parents and other adults play a major role in the settings involving group experience.

The data do not so much imply a contradiction of Piaget as suggest a reinterpretation of the theories accounting for development of moral judgment within a Piagetian context. It appears to be that young children's moral development is more complicated than the unidimensional consequence/intention dichotomy of Piaget. The child's use of intention is hardly an all-or none phenomenon and perhaps the Piagetian concept of horizontal decalage needs to be applied to the development of moral reasoning. This concept refers to the child's ability at a given chronological age to perform with varying degrees of success on tasks involving the same basic mental operations but presented in different contexts. There may exist a period during which judgments are influenced by the social experience of young children, such that the saliency of the intent or consequence is a function of the social milieu. The focus of moral judgment research needs to attend to the complexity of subject and task variables to account for the development of moral reasoning of children

younger than seven years. It is the author's contention that the use of the Piagetian notions of centration and horizontal decalage may provide necessary framework for a comprehensive theory of the development of moral reasoning in young children.

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Table 1
Mean Story Character Ratings by Story Type and
Social Experience Variables

	Story Content					
	Negative Intention/Positive Consequence			Positive Intention/Negative Consequence		
	Person	Personal Property	Other's Property	Person	Personal Property	Other's Property
Group-Care (n=20)	2.57 ^a	4.68	2.55	2.10	2.45	3.10
Home-Based (n=15)	3.77**	3.60*	2.24	2.33	3.30	3.01

^aAlthough analysis was conducted on combined ratings for two stories, table means have been converted to reflect the scale used by the subjects (i.e., 1 indicates very bad and 8 indicates very good).

* $p < .10$

** $p < .05$, all probability values listed in table refer only to comparisons made between group-care and home-based children in a single story context.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Example of drawings used to display story action.

